New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Dead Pigeon"

New York Post

December 24, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Girl and the Crooked Cops

Out of the unpromising material of an encounter between two crooked cops and a girl convict, temporarily out of prison to testify as a prosecution witness, Lenard Kantor has written a rather touching little three-character theatrical narrative, part gangster drama and part unrefined "Voice of the Turtle." It doesn't quite come off as a play, being somewhat thin and uninventive in its suspense, but it is attractively acted by Joan Lorring, Lloyd Bridges and James Gregory, and a good deal of it is quite entertaining.

Apparently, the author has taken his story from the notorious Abe Reles case, which attracted a lot of attention in the annals of politics and crime, but he has changed the sex of its leading figure. As he tells it, the girl is in the custody of the two detectives in a resort hotel for 24 hours, while she is deciding whether she will squeal to the district attorney about the murder of her ex-lover. The cops are in the pay of the crime syndicate, and the plan seems to be to push her out the window and make it look like suicide.

Cop in Love

This, you may possibly say, hardly looks like the beginning of a play that has any tenderness in it, even though one of the policeman falls in love with the girl. But it happens that the girl is rather a wistful and well-intentioned child, who has never had any luck, and the boy is basically a pleasant young fellow, who hasn't yet become hardened in his corruption. These questionable but likeable lovers are excellently played by Miss Lorring and Mr. Bridges, and the playwright has written the characters with humorous sympathy, with the result that their romance is remarkably pleasant.

It is, I think, in the suspense that "Dead Pigeon"—and what an unpromising title that is!—has its chief defect. The menace is provided by the other cop, a police lieutenant who is hardened in crime but not too sullen about it. He apparently spends most of his time prowling about the near-by hotel room, and there is a certain amount of point made about the peril that lurks in hiding for the lovers, but I'm afraid the danger seems a little too casual.

Humor and Emotion

This lack of a sufficient amount of good, menacing suspense means that the play must rely heavily on the growing romantic attachment between the young policeman and the girl, and to manage it with a successful combination of humor and emotion demands high comedy skill in the writing. Some of this skill is present, and much of "Dead Pigeon" is bright and agreeable, but it also runs pretty thin upon occasions, and Mr. Kantor hasn't sufficient invention to keep his play going steadily at the proper pitch of effectiveness.

American actors are at their best in this sort of realistic comedy melodrama, and "Dead Pigeon" is greatly helped in the playing. Miss Lorring is both sympathetic and humorous as the girl, and Mr. Bridges brings a quiet, rugged charm and simplicity to the part of the detective. Mr. Gregory has a smaller role as the menacing lieutenant, but he, too, plays with admirable credibility and incisiveness. So much of the new play is real and interesting that it seems all the more a shame it isn't just a bit more satisfying.

"DEAD PIGEON"

Play by Lenard Kantor; staged by Harald Bromley; setting by William and Jean Eckart; presented by Mr. Bromley and Haila Stoddard at the Vanderbilt Theatre, December 23, 1953. The cast:

Lieut. Monahan.. James Gregory
Sherry Parker.... Joan Lorring
Detective Ernest Brady..... Lloyd Bridges

Daily Mirror

December 24, 1953

'Dead Pigeon' Has Debut At the Vanderbilt

By ROBERT COLEMAN

One of the most difficult of dramaturgical feats to bring off is the penning of a full-length play with but three characters. Okay, there was "The Voice of the Turtle." And "The Moon Is Blue," if you figure one of its quartet did a brief walk-on.

To make a trio of people interesting for an evening, you must deal with people who are fascinating, whose speech is witty or wise and whose actions have import. They have got to be superior. Unfortunately, the triangle involved in Lenard Kantor's "Dead Pigeon" doesn't meet those specifications.

THEY ARE A COUPLE of crooked detectives assigned to guard a stool pigeon who has promised to sing if the D.A. will knock five years off her sentence. The dicks are larceny artists of a different feather. Both are willing to shake down bookies, but one balks at the murder of a material witness.

Particularly when said witness is a pretty girl with whom he falls in love. And his corkscrew conscience is even more upset when he learns that the cute canary hasn't a darn thing to chirp about. All the gal really wanted was a 24-hour holiday from a cell, to which she had been railroaded by a gangster boyfriend.

If you want to know what happens after that, you'll have to visit the Vanderbilt Theatre for it's against the reviewing rules to tip off the punch of a melodrama. Anyway, we can tell you that canto three boasts a corking good, slam-bang, no-holds-barred scrap.

"DEAD PIGEON" is essentially a one-act thriller, padded into three. Kantor has shown considerable resource in tackling the job, but hasn't quite made the grade. Some of his dialogue is good, but too much of it is pedestrian. The lingo is accurate enough, but not very stimulating or rewarding.

Harald Bromley and Haila Stoddard have given the new arrival the benefits of an excellent cast and a suitable set by William and Jean Eckart. The latter clicked last week with admirable backgrounds for "Oh, Men! Oh, Women."

Joan Lorring has some touching moments as the girl who tries to pack a lot of memories into her 24 hours of freedom. She has a sensitive, appealing touch as the kid who memorized a new word each day, and dreamed, to keep from going stir crazy. The purchase of a dress, the ordering of a big meal, the taking of a bath in private, she makes you feel are worth the raps that may follow.

* * *

LLOYD BRIDGES is likable as the susceptible and careless young sleuth who discards his gat to learn the tango. And James Gregory, so adept at playing nice guys, proves that he is also expert as a heel.

"Dead Pigeon," in our opinion, is likely to prove a prophetic title, because Kantor has been too sparing with characters. Had he tossed in a few more, he might have generated enough excitement to hold the attention of an audience for an evening. As it is, there's too much mood and not enough action.

With production costs what they are today, it is easy to understand why authors aim for plays with few characters and one set. But economy of means can mean defeat. After all, variety is the spice of life.

DAILY NEWS
December 24, 1953

'Dead Pigeon' Lively Melodrama Played by Three Capable Actors

By JOHN CHAPMAN

In "Dead Pigeon," which opened last evening at the Vanderbilt Theatre, a girl is brought out of prison to a suite in a seaside hotel at the request of a district attorney who hopes that she will reveal the location of boodle hidden by an old mobster friend of hers who is now suddenly dead. During her one-day vacation from an 11-year stretch this innocent and charming young lady is guarded by two detectives—one good one and one bad one.

A Rousing Fight.

This is almost all I should tell you about the substance of the play; indeed, the author, Lenard Kantor, tells little more. But Kantor has spilled his story most adroitly and it is being acted most resourcefully by Joan Lorring, Lloyd Bridges and James Gregory. "Dead Pigeon" is an excellent piece of theatrical fiction, and I can prescribe it for people who have become bored.

Fiction it is, simple and pure; but it is considerably better than the hash tossed by Erle Stanley Gardner's 24-hour shift of 14 stenographers or the human hamburger and bone-marrow ground out by Mickey Spillane. It has a certain style and reticence, an ear for believable talk, good characterization and a fine slam-bang fight to top off the third act. Seems to me this fight is the first enjoyable fit of violence I have seen on the stage since the detective got shot in the belly in "Detective Story"—revivals of Shakespeare excepted, of course.

Gregory Is Sinister.

Only in fiction, obviously, could a girl emerge from three years in what she herself calls the pokey and look as healthy and sweet as Miss Lorring does—or have such a fashionable multi-toned pony-tail hairdo. But what do I care? She is good to look at, and, more importantly, she is a very good little actress. Every step of the way she makes her playwright's bit of fiction convincing as she plays a nice girl who was framed into prison and doesn't mind having a sentimental roll in the hay with the high-minded young detective who has taken over the night shift in her beach-resort prison.

Bridges plays the noble dick with great charm and he falls in love with Miss Lorring with ease. The other cop, Gregory, is the bad one. He is the fellow who has been bribed by the underworld to see to it that little Joan becomes a dead pigeon before she gets a chance to squeal to the district attorney tomorrow morning. Gregory's performance is a jim-dandy—suave, sinister and, even so, humorous.

Haila Stoddard and her husband, Harald Bromley, have produced "Dead Pigeon" with a good hotel-room setting by William and Jean Eckart, and Bromley has directed this three-character stunt as if he believed every word of it. That's the way fiction should be made. I didn't really believe a sentence or a scene of "Dead Pigeon," and I enjoyed it all.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune
December 24, 1953

THEATER

'Dead Pigeon'

By WALTER F. KERR

"DEAD PIGEON" means to be a tough-minded little play, but its principal tough-guys seems to have come to their work rather recently. Two of the enterprise's three characters are policemen, and they wear shiny new holsters which must surely be the pride of the force.

Otherwise, these gents beetle their brows, hunch their shoulders, squint through cigarette smoke, and put their feet all over the furniture with the rugged daredevilry of a couple of fellows determined to make it to Boy's Town.

• • •

Actually, the melodramatic situation which Lenard Kantor has whipped up for the new play at the Vanderbilt isn't a bad one. A blonde dish who is doing eleven years on a homicide charge is given a day of freedom from the state penitentiary. She is ostensibly hauled out to tell the D. A. what she knows about a recent killing. In fact, she is being decoyed to a hotel room where her suicide can be conveniently arranged—to keep her from telling whatever she knows.

Lieutenant Monahan is the cop in charge of her twenty-four-hour sojourn. Since he is comfortably allied with the big-town's baddest 'syndicate,' he is also in charge of her immediate demise. He has, however, a young and handsome assistant, a man who has scruples about murder and a taste for nice, dumb girls in bright red dresses.

• • •

The business of trapping this edgy trio in a remote resort hotel, with assorted threats hanging over each head, ought to create some theatrical electricity. There is a promise of tension from the outset, the characters are nicely matched for a tricky struggle, and the last curtain does come down on a wrestling match all over the rug.

But that promise of tension becomes an exhausting delay of tension. In the first act, Mr. Kanter holds off the expected suspense by letting his conscientious junior detective and his brassy doll talk to each other about the glories of fresh air. In the second act, he has them turn on the radio, try out a few dance steps, and embrace passionately more times than I could count or they could manage convincingly. (With each embrace you wait for a locked door to open, a stealthy interloper to appear; by the time it does open, you figure it's a new set of characters arriving for a brand new play). The third act works in some more fairly moony lovemaking ("I can hear my heart") before the killer shows up, sprawls on the bed, and gets ready for the big deal.

• • •

In general, the author has dawdled over everything we'd willingly take for granted, and skimped on the three-way tug-of-war that might have been exciting. Once in awhile he remembers that an ominous undercurrent is called for, and then we are likely to get a great lifting of eyebrows and a spatter of lines like:

"Remember—you're representing the department."

"Is that all I'm representing, Lieutenant?"

Since there are only three people to do all of the acting, each of them acts just a little too much. The stage is at its liveliest whenever James Gregory is on, callously flipping coins as he prepares to deliver a harmless lass to the county morgue. Mr. Gregory's corrupt Lieutenant is a near-credible figure as he lovingly dwells on the merits of a sex novel, or dreams idly of his future in Florida ("where you can't see the sand for the slobs").

Joan Lorring is the minx who doesn't mind being knocked off if she can have just one more day to luxuriate in real furniture, real shower baths, and a splendid view of the sea. The actress is fine so long as she is giggling happily over a purloined dress or apologizing for her coarse language (she's been used to talking to just girls). When she is asked to choke up over the beauties of nature or the burgeoning of true love, though, she is unable to keep step with the author's unlikely changes of pace.

Lloyd Bridges, as the boy who falls rapidly in love, is best when he has decided to relax and live it up a little. The rest of the time he is caught in the synthetic scowl-and-growl postures which are intended to make the evening taut but succeed only in making it tiresome.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 24, 1953

'Dead Pigeon' Opens With Lloyd Bridges

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"Dead Pigeon," new entry at the Vanderbilt, is a diverting and rather mechanical melodrama. Plucked from the headlines, the play is based on an elaborate situation, so complex in its premise that there can never be much suspense about its development.

A girl has been brought from prison to a beachside hotel by the D.A. under guard. For 24-hours freedom, she has agreed to sing about her former protector's activity in a crime syndicate.

Not Yet Lost.

Involved with her in this amnesty are a police lieutenant who is tied up with the gangsters, and a youthful detective. The latter knows a thing or two and has taken a buck or two. But he is not yet lost.

It is foreordained in the course of human events, that a three characters play involving this trio, is shortly going to find the lady convict and the detective deeper in love. The young man realizes that the lieutenant is likely to shove the girl out the window rather than risk her telling all.

This prospect is never made really threatening. And therein the play loses most of its potential suspense.

Sinuous Dancing.

The love story progresses along accepted lines. There is a bottle of Scotch, music on the radio, and lots of sinuous dancing. There is a filmy nightgown, some nerve-racking hesitation, and the case of the young detective who cannot find one of his socks in the morning.

A plot twist toward the end ought to heighten the suspense, but instead lets it down. And finally the situation is resolved not by ingenuity, but fisticuffs.

"Dead Pigeon" is a setup which would have made a fair B movie. It still would supply TV with a good enough hour show. In the theater, it seems strung out. The melodrama is padded with character development. The characters are padded with trite talk.

Doesn't Live.

Since it is all so loaded with familiar elements, the play is mildly remarkable for holding one's interest as constantly as it does. The trouble is that neither the story nor the people are ever really arresting. The conflict never comes to life.

The acting is more than agreeable in the confines of the drama. Joan Lorring is the romantic little moll who will risk anything for a day of freedom. The role never soars, but Miss Lorring combines tenderness and sturdiness, without ever asking for sympathy. It is a long and wordy part, which she never makes tricky. You end up knowing the girl. The trouble is you do not care much what happens to her, which is not the actress' fault.

Shallow Character.

Lloyd Bridges is the detective who finds true love on a routine assignment. Here again the actor creates an engaging figure without being able to score deeply, because the character is shallow.

Better off is James Gregory as the villain. He is onstage least of the three, and has an unwavering point of view, immoral and ruthless, to play. His humorous moments are telling, if not ingeniously conceived.

Journal-American

December 24, 1953

Well-Written And Acted Play

By JOHN McCLAIN

IT TAKES considerable courage to bring to Broadway a new play entitled "Dead Pigeon"—especially during Christmas week—and it takes even more fortitude when the proceedings consist entirely of one set and three players.

But that's what Harald Bromley and Haila Stoddard presented last night at the Vanderbilt Theatre, and it is the humble opinion of this department that they got away with it.

This will not be the greatest success of the season by any means, but it is a diverting and entirely authentic little melodrama, written with humor and occasional brilliance and acted superlatively by Lloyd Bridges, Joan Lorring and James Gregory.

It is the first effort of Lenard Kantor, the author, and he has a fine ear as well as a perceptive sense of drama.

Rings True

As a one-time headquarters reporter I feel safe in remarking that these two police characters of his talk as much like the genuine article as any reasonable facsimilie in recent years. This is a decided relief after the deluge of synthetic sleuths offered by TV, radio and movies.

I haven't had much truck with lady convicts lately, but if I had I'm sure they would speak in much the same language that Mr. Kantor has designed for Miss Lorring.

It is of course a difficult job to keep action alive with only three people for more than two hours, and there are times when "Dead Pigeon" dies. But then one is captured by the quality of the lingo and by the extremely adept performances of the three contestants. There is a cloying love scene, a well-executed fight, and enough humorous interludes to keep the ball in the air.

Mr. Kantor has a wispy plot, at best. A material witness in a rackets trial (Miss Lorring) has been sprung from jail and made the guest of the city in a hotel room awaiting a visit from the District Attorney. She is being guarded by two detectives, a lieutenant (Gregory) and a rookie (Bridges).

Well, she and Bridges fall in love, and the rest of the evening is concerned with how they can get together over the objections of Gregory, who takes a tough and materialistic view of the circumstances.

Holds Interest

The fact that this is a meagre premise puts a distinct burden on the author and the actors, and it is a tribute that they are able to hold the audience with as much success. It seemed that interest lagged toward the end of the first act, but it revived quickly and was sustained through the remaining two.

Both Lloyd Bridges and James Gregory deploy themselves expertly as the members of the police force, and Joan Lorring gives a most believable interpretation of the mixed-up little doll from the pokey.

William and Jean Eckart have run up a pleasant reproduction of a hotel bedroom and I thought Mr. Bromley, who directed, had a fine sense of the airs and mannerisms of the custodians of the law.

I had a good time.

The New York Times

December 24, 1953

Three Good Actors Squander Lots of Talent on a Play Called 'Dead Pigeon'

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Despite what you may have heard, actors are talented people. In "Dead Pigeon," which opened at the Vanderbilt last evening, three actors treat a verbose, monotonous script as if it were a poetic idyll. The actors are Joan Lorring, as a material witness temporarily released from jail; Lloyd Bridges, as a detective detailed to guard her and James Gregory, as a police lieutenant who is also a part-time assassin.

The script is the work of Lenard Kantor who does not have much to say, although he does have all evening in which to say it. He has written a tough-talking story about a female jail-bird who is being held in a hotel suite by the district attorney under the guard of an amiable detective. He knows, and we know, that the mob is going to have her bumped off.

* * *

Isolate an attractive young blonde in a hotel suite with a handsome cop, and you know what to expect, at least if you are an experienced theatergoer. In this case, love is genuine. Like all good-looking felons, she is not as incorrigible as you might at first suspect; and the cop is a diamond in the rough. The author has a disarming subject. But he has a minimum of writing talent to apply to it. In order to spin it out to the conventional length of a three-act play, he has to pad it with non-sequiters and other digressions in the vernacular. To judge by the present instance, Mr. Kantor is a thoroughly routine writer.

The set is the work of William and Jean Eckart. They have designed a resort hotel-room that is gaudy in a refined manner—a very personable background for this sort of drama. Excepting for a pace that is painfully slow, Harald Bromley's direction is illuminating and carefully detailed.

All the acting is admirable. Miss Lorring's portrait of the jail-bird is a beautiful piece of work. In a sensitively planned performance, Miss Lorring conveys the romantic spirit that lurks inside the tawdriness of the character. Although the surface is cheap, the spirit is bright, honest and winning. Call it evocative acting.

* * *

As the detective, Lloyd Bridges also portrays an interesting human being—an average cop who becomes an individual with a specific character before the play is over. James Gregory's oily, cunning, off-handed, treacherous police lieutenant is a vivid, effortless character study.

The actors are vastly superior to the script and they play it with talent and sincerity. If actors did not need plays, what a wonderful theatre they might bring into being!

"Charley's Aunt"

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

December 23, 1953

THEATER

'Charley's Aunt'

By WALTER F. KERR

Charley's Aunt II

THE City Center season—or Down Through the Ages with Jose Ferrer—has now arrived at "Charley's Aunt." On the whole, it's a happy landing.

Mr. Ferrer first tangled himself in Lord Fancourt Babberley's curls, petticoats, and old lace shawls in 1940, then under the direction of Joshua Logan. It should be said at once that the holiday romp at the municipal playhouse could well stand the impact of Mr. Logan's firm hand.

This indestructible relic—nowadays played as a headlong barrage of sight-gags—calls for a confident style and some spectacular split-second timing if it is to keep its heels in the air. The supporting company which Mr. Ferrer has assembled for the moment gets decidedly winded as it takes to the hurdles.

* * *

But Mr. Ferrer is unflaggingly present to bound through a window or over a wall and quickly set things to rights. When the star is on stage, everything works. An involved triple-play, in which a valet is tipped with money just borrowed from him, seems perfectly fresh merriment. The time-honored business of stooping for a hat and kicking it happily away with each stoop shines like new. One of the most elaborate insect-bashing routines I know of (it is finally trapped in a piano and battered to death by the keys) is given a fast, precise, and wholly hilarious workout.

In addition, Mr. Ferrer has found two spots to take over with the relish and resourcefulness of a true vaudevillian. One is a last-ditch battle with Kent Smith over an available slug of whiskey: the actor scrapes the last drops off the table with an aplomb that would do credit to the Palace. The other is a prolonged session at the piano, an off-key interlude which would by no means disgrace Victor Borge. Otherwise, as Mr. Ferrer helps his Oxford companions unravel their romantic complications (first thing you know I'll be giving away the plot), he chews at his widow's weeds, sets a rose between his teeth, duels with the silverware, and pours tea, cream, and sugar into the nearest top hat. It's all cosily familiar, and it's all very funny.

* * *

If the perfectly competent players who labor at the edges of the masquerade are faint-hearted companions for the principal clown, it's no doubt due to that stock-company rehearsal schedule which continues to leave its mark on City Center offerings. The people involved are certainly pleasant enough. Kent Smith is an agreeable sporting print, tilting his cane and twitching his mustache, as an undergraduate's impoverished parent. Peggy Wood sweeps on gracefully and smiles winningly as the genuine visitor from Brazil. Jacques Auchubon puffs across the stage between sideburns, Patricia Wheel, Sarah Marshall, and Lori March pose prettily, and Robert Lansing and Terence Kilburn buzz about urgently in blazers and straws.

They labor at the lunacy, though, and it is left for Mr. Ferrer to give the evening real buoyance.

"CHARLEY'S AUNT"

Farce by Brandon Thomas; staged by Jose Ferrer; settings by Raoul Pene du Bois; costumes by Emeline Roche; revived by the New York City Theatre Company (Jean Dalrymple, coordinator) at New York City Center, December 22, 1953. The cast:

Brassett.....Rex O'Malley
Jack Chesney...Robert Lansing
Charles Wykeham.....
Terence Kilburn
Lord Fancourt Babberley.....
Jose Ferrer
Kitty Verdun.....Lori March
Amy Spettigue...Sarah Marshall
Col. Sir Francis Chesney.....
Kent Smith
Stephen Spettigue.....
Jacques Aubuchon
Farmer.....Richard Cowdery
Donna Lucia d'Alvadorez.....
Peggy Wood
Ela Delahay.....Patricia Wheel
Maud.....Beverly Dennis

Raoul Pene du Bois has designed colorful new backgrounds for the production—a tasseled rose front-drop with a fine period flavor, a variety of college views, a striped pink-and-brown sitting-room that gives the third act a great lift—and as soon as the stagehands get around to holding them all up they ought to look cheerful indeed.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

December 23, 1953

Ferrer Funniest Yet As Charley's Aunt

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Jose Ferrer has revived "Charley's Aunt" at the City Center, and it is as gay as jingling Christmas bells.

The old comedy is not only the funniest thing Ferrer has done, but one of the funniest anybody has done. Its situations have been used so often, and are so rooted in essential comedy, that their very familiarity becomes a great virtue.

Ferrer romps through it with devilment and fun that could only be conceived and clowned by a very fine actor. This happens to be a fine cast and a perfectly beautiful production, but the evening remains the star's, which is all to the good.

Years of Propriety.

The Nineties at Oxford, like anywhere else, were years of propriety, demanding social protocol. Once his friends have gotten Ferrer disguised as an elderly lady, in order to chaperone their own young girls, the fun is roundly off and never stops.

Ferrer has dreamed up a wonderful air for the play. His resourcefulness now is something way beyond what it was when he first played the comedy in 1940. He is never at a loss to fill a split second of the transparent plot, and he is entirely sure of his effects.

He is impudent and rascally. He can look so indignant and injured that you actually begin to feel sorry for his bruised dignity. When the situation gets too much for him, he drops in a twinkling to the most disgustedly butch mood.

In the final act, perhaps because the tea party is so hard to top, he does a delightful turn on the piano. This already has begun putting his fellow actors into stitches. In a few more days there is no telling what his comic invention there may lead to.

Elated Style.

Peggy Wood doffs the housegowns of "Mama" to turn up as the true Aunt, in some exquisite golden gowns. She plays with a lovely elated style that suits the play perfectly.

As her old love, rediscovered, Kent Smith is elegant with a gentlemanly swagger. His sequence, parrying with Ferrer for possession of the whisky bottle, is one of the evening's best.

Rex O'Malley is particularly good as the butler of the boys, and Jacques Aubuchon is a sturdy Spettigue. The young ladies are lovely—Pat Wheel as the long lost inamorata of Ferrer, and Sarah Marshall and Lori March as the two shy and gracious blossoms, for love of whom all the trouble begins.

Grand Results.

Robert Lansing and Terry Kilburn are fleet and cheery with all their complications and amorous hopes.

"Charley's Aunt" was written in a day when three full sets was an ordinary production. The Center has encouraged Raoul Rene du Bois to go all out on his designs, and the result is grand.

Daily Mirror

December 23, 1953

Jose Ferrer Wonderful In 'Charley's Aunt'

By ROBERT COLEMAN

When Brandon Thomas penned "Charley's Aunt" back in 1892, he proved that rowdy hokum is worth its weight in gold. This rollicking farce has been revived many times over the years. It was even made into a successful musical. It brought the author and his estate a sizeable fortune.

THERE SHOULD BE a lesson in it for some of our overly sophisticated modern dramatists. They have been drawing our theatre too fine, draining the vitality from it. What the public really wants is to laugh robustly and unabashedly, or to be moved forward to the edge of its seat with excitement.

In 1940 Jose Ferrer delighted Broadway for months in a first-rate revival of the Thomas romp. Now, he is again creating gales of laughter in it at the City Center, as the Lord Fancourt Babberley impressed by his Oxford pals into impersonating the rich aunt of one of them. Once more, the result is hilarious.

It seems to us that Ferrer is even funnier in '53 than he was 13 years ago. Perhaps time has dimmed our memory a bit, but he does appear to have invented some new business that is sure-fire. The first-nighters at the Center roared at his antics until their ribs must have ached.

A DEDICATED company gives him admirable support. Patricia Wheel, Sarah Marshall and Lori March are lovely as the girls involved in romance at Oxford. Robert Lansing and Terence Kilburn are ingratiating as the undergraduates whose party takes a hectic turn.

Peggy Wood and Kent Smith bring style to the real widow from Brazil and the officer who might have married her years before. Jacques Aubuchon is good as the selfish guardian always on the lookout to enrich his purse. And Rex O'Malley is wonderfully amusing as the long-suffering valet.

Raoul Rene Du Bois has designed appropriately rococo sets on a limited budget, while Emeline Roche has contributed nostalgic period costumes. Jess Kimmel has assisted Ferrer with the fast-paced direction.

WE CANNOT RECALL that "Charley's Aunt" ever failed, in all its many manifestations. It has become a perennial joy. It has inspired dozens of imitations, but none of these has been so successful. For "Charley's Aunt" is a slapstick masterpiece. A champ in its own field.

Ferrer and his associates have all made financial sacrifices to appear in four revivals at City Center this season. But for the generosity of players, acting for Equity minimums, we could not have had minor and major roles played half so expertly. To these exponents of a great tradition, we owe a debt of gratitude.

"Charley's Aunt" will wind up a drama semester that has given us "Cyrano," "The Shrike" and "Richard III" at reasonable prices.

Ferrer has appeared in all of them. It is remarkable that he has enough energy left now to clown so dynamically through this concluding frolic. For those who like to laugh, it should be a must.

The New York Times

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AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

To celebrate the conclusion of an exhausting drama season, Mr. Ferrer is now romping through "Charley's Aunt," which opened at the City Center last evening. Old and creaky though Brandon Thomas' farce may be, it makes a good holiday on both sides of the footlights. Mr. Ferrer plays it like a combination of Groucho Marx and Harpo—Groucho when he is in a bridling mood, Harpo when he is making mince-meat of the piano.

But there is a lot of José Ferrer in it, too. In 1940 Mr. Ferrer first brought himself to the attention of art lovers by belaboring this farce under the direction of Joshua Logan, who was also at the time a candidate for grandeur. They have both made an indelible impression on the last thirteen years in New York because they are both gifted and versatile craftsmen.

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Since Ray Bolger has recently taught the town the elementary principles of "Charley's Aunt" in "Where's Charley?" it will not be necessary to describe the plot here. Without a musical score and a corps of dancers, "Charley's Aunt" does seem more rickety than it used to. But this is pantomime season in London and a holiday season here. And all that matters is that Mr. Ferrer's horseplay is very funny, indeed. Nothing is much more hilarious than his little interludes of coyness or his mincing gestures of vanity. In or out of female dress he is not the elegant type.

Although no one else has as fat a part, the performance is generally excellent. The cast includes Peggy Wood (very handsome), Kent Smith (very handsome, too), and Jacques Aubuchon and Rex O'Malley, who are affable comedians. In 1953 the tongue-tied, anxious courting episodes between the Oxford students and fair maidens are rather charmingly formal, like old-fashioned lace Valentines. It would be interesting to know what attitude audiences of 1892 had toward these scenes. Did audiences ever take them seriously? Or were they always formalities incidental to a roisterous farce?

"Charley's Aunt" is the fourth and concluding production in Mr. Ferrer's City Center season. The occasion should not pass without taking note of what he has accomplished. During the preceding six weeks he has acted "Cyrano de Bergerac," "The Shrike" and "Richard III." He has also personally staged three of the productions. They have been well cast and acted. They have made the theatre seem like a fresh, exciting, varied form of public art. Since the public has liked them, they have put the City Center in the strongest financial situation of its ten-year career. From every point of view this has been the best dramatic season that hospitable institution has had.

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Many public-spirited people have helped to make the season stimulating. But Mr. Ferrer has been the driving spirit. New York owes him a vote of thanks. Can't Grover Whalen present him with an official carnation on the stage of the City Center? There is still one unfinished job of ceremony for our departing Grover.

Journal American

December 23, 1953

Ferrer Revival Good—but Dated

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE MUST BE quite a few characters around who want to see "Charley's Aunt," in which case they can be accommodated at the New York City Center Theatre these next dozen nights. Jose Ferrer is playing the Aunt, supported by Peggy Wood and Kent Smith and an auspicious following of talented featured players.

This is a big production, which must necessarily be said of anything produced in the over-sized auditorium, and it seems to suffer somewhat as a result. Actors have to scream to be heard and there is no way to reduce the stage to the proper dimensions for playing an intimate scene.

There is also the fact that the old play is just plain dated. Perhaps we've all been spoiled by Ray Bolger's "Where's Charley?", the musical adaptation, but I came away unsatisfied.

Familiar Plot

You recall the plot: Charles Wykeham, an Oxford student, is informed that an aunt he had never seen is about to visit him at college.

This fits in with his plans to entertain his sweetheart and when word arrives that the Aunt won't show he gets his pal, Lord Fancourt Babberley (Jose Ferrer), to put on a wig and a dress and play the part.

Then, of course, the real aunt (Peggy Wood) turns up and renews an old romance with Kent Smith, the impoverished father of Charlie's room-mate. There are many detours and distractions en route, but those are the grim essentials.

The vision of a man in woman's garb is, of course, certain to get laughs, but they are not easily sustained once the original idea is accepted.

In this instance, Mr. Ferrer has taken great pains to milk the incidental business for all it's worth. There is, for instance, the longest possible duel over who will eventually get possession of a bottle of whiskey. Finally, I didn't care.

Well-Done Show

In common with the other productions in the current series, this is an expensive and tastefully-mounted show. Raoul Pene Du Bois has devised three engaging sets to fill the staggering perimeter of the stage, yet maintaining some sense of intimacy for the complicated action. One of the stage walls nearly toppled over last night, but that was not his error.

Mr. Ferrer is probably as good a Charlie's Aunt as we'll see in this decade, and there is nothing but praise from here for the efforts of Kent Smith and Peggy Wood.

I also liked Sarah Marshall, Lori March and Rex O'Malley, although I was not completely carried away by Terence Kilburn or Robert Lansing. Real corny roles—not the fault of the actors.

Well, there you are. You want to see "Charley's Aunt" at popular prices? It's at City Center.